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The Spring
Concert
by
Booth Tarkington



The Spring Concert

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THE RIDGWAY COMPANY

NEW YORK

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New York

The Spring Concert

By

Booth Tarkington

Author of "The Turmoil," "Penrod," "Seventeen," etc.

 HE town was only about eighty years old, but it loved to think of itself as a "good old place," and it habitually spoke of the residence of its principal citizen as "that old-fashioned Ricketts property."

This was an under-statement: the Ricketts place was more than merely old-fashioned. So rapidly do fashions change in houses, nowadays, in small towns as well as in big, and so quickly does life become history, that the "Ricketts property" at fifty years of age was an actual archæological relic. Contemplating the place you contemplated a prevalent way of life already abandoned, and learned a bit of Midland history. The Ricketts place was a left-over from that period when every Midland townsman was his own farmer, according to his means; and if he was able, kept his cow and chickens, and raised corn and pigs at home.

The barn was a farm barn, with a barnyard about it; here were the empty pig-pens and the chicken house, the latter still inhabited. In summer, sweet corn was still grown in the acre lot adjoining the barnyard; and, between that lot and the driveway from the barn, there was a kitchen garden, there was an asparagus bed, and there was a strawberry patch fringed with currant-bushes. Behind the house were outbuildings: the storeroom, the wash-house, the smoke-house. Here was the long grape-arbor, and here stood the two pumps: one of iron, for the cistern; the other a wooden flute that sang higher and higher to an incredible pitch before it fetched the water.

The house was a large, pensive-looking, honest old frame thing, with a front porch all across it; and the most casual passer-by must have guessed that there was a great deal of clean oilcloth on the hall floors, and that cool mattings were laid, in summer, in all the rooms—mattings pleasant to the bare feet of children. It was a house that “smelled good”: aromas at once sweet and spicy were wont to swim down the mild breezes of Pawpaw Street, whereon the Ricketts place fronted.

In the latter part of April the perfume of apple-blossoms was adrift on those breezes, too; for all the west side of the big yard was an apple orchard, and trees stood so close to the house that a branch of blossoms could be gathered from one of the “sitting-room” windows—and on a warm end-of-April day, when that orchard was full abloom, last year, there

sat reading a book, beneath the carnival clouds of blossom, an apple-blossom of a girl.

So she was informed by Mr. Lucius Brutus Allen. Mr. Allen came walking up Pawpaw Street from Main Street, about five o'clock in the afternoon; a broad, responsible figure with a broad, irresponsible face, and a good, solid, reddish-haired head behind the face. He was warm, it appeared; inclined to refresh his legs with a pause of leisure, his nose with the smell of the orchard, his eyes with the sight of its occupant. He halted, rested his stout forearms upon the top of the picket-fence, and in his own way made the lady acquainted with his idea of her appearance.

"A generous soil makes a generous people, Miss Mary," he observed; and she looked up gravely from her book at the sound of his tremulous tenor voice. "You see, most of this country in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys is fertile. We don't have to scratch the rocks for our crops, so we have time to pronounce our *r*'s. We've even got the leisure to drawl a little. A Yankee, now, he's too pinched for time, between his hard rocks and his hard winters, to pronounce his *r*'s; so he calls his mother 'motha,' and hurries on. But he's conscientious, Miss Mary; he knows he's neglected something, and so, to make up for it, he calls his sister 'Mariar.' Down South it's too hot for a fellow to trouble about the whole blame alphabet, so he says, 'Lessee, which lettuh's goin' to be the easies' to leave out?' he says. 'Well, the *r*'s, I reckon,' he says. 'An' *g*,' he says. 'I'll leave *r* out most the time, an' *g* whenevuh I get the chance—an' some-

times *d an' t*. 'That'll be a heap easiuh,' he says, 'when I'm claimin' my little boy is the smahtis' chile in the worl'.'

Mr. Allen paused genially, then concluded: "You see, Miss Mary, I've just been leading up logically to the question: Which is you and which is the rest of the apple-blossoms?"

Miss Ricketts made no vocal reply, but there was a slight concentration of the fine space between her eyebrows; decidedly no symptom of pleasure, though she might properly have enjoyed the loiterer's little extravagance, which was far from being inaccurate as extravagances go. Mr. Allen was forced to remind himself that "nobody loves a fat man," though he decided not to set his thought before the lady.

A smile of some ruefulness became just visible upon the ample surface of his face, then withdrew to the interior, and was transmuted into a quality of his odd and pleasant voice, which was distinctly rueful as he said:

"It's the weather, Miss Mary. You musn't mind what anybody says along during the first warm days in spring. People are liable to say anything at all."

"Yes," Miss Ricketts returned, not mollified. "I've just noticed." She gave him one dark glance, wholly unfavorable, as she spoke, and then looked down at her book again, allowing him no possible doubt that she wished to proceed with her reading.

"I'm a hard man to discourage," said Mr. Allen. "The band's going to play in the Square to-night. It's been practising 'Annie Laurie' and 'Tenting To-

night' all winter, up in the storeroom over Tom Leggett's wall-paper and book emporium, and of course the boys are anxious to give their first concert. What I wanted to say was this: If I came by for you after supper, would you care to go?"

"No," said Miss Ricketts quietly, not looking up.

Before continuing and concluding the conversation, Lucius Brutus Allen paused to contemplate the top of her pink and white hat, which was significantly presented to his view as she bent over her book; and the pause was a wistful one on his part. "Seeing as that's the case," he said, finally, "I may be a hard man to discourage, and I *was* on my way home, but I believe I'll just turn right square around and go on back to the National House bar—and get me a drink of lemonade. I want to show people I'm as desperate as anybody, when I'm crossed."

Immediately, with an air of resolution, Mr. Allen set off upon the path by which he had come. He debouched upon Main Street, at the foot of Pawpaw, crossed the Square to the dismal brick pile much too plainly labeled, "National House Will Wheen Propr.," and passed between two swinging, green, knee-high doors on the ground floor. "George," he said to the bartender, "I'm not happy. Have you any lemons?"

The bartender rubbed the back of his neck, stooped, and poked and peered variously beneath the long bar. "Seems like I *did* have some, Lu," he said thoughtfully. "I remember seein' them lemons last Mon——"

"No," Mr. Allen interrupted, sighing. "I've been through this before with you, George. I'll take buttermilk."

"Oh, got plenty *buttermilk*!" the bartender said, brightening; and supplied his customer from a large, bedewed white pitcher. "Buttermilk goes good this weather, don't it, Lu?"

"It do," said Lucius, gravely.

Glass in hand, he went to a small, round table where sat the only other present patron of the bar—a young man well-favored, but obviously in a state morbid if not moribund. He did not look up at Mr. Allen's approach; continuing to sit motionless with his faraway gaze marooned upon a stratum of amber light in his glass on the table before him.

He was a picturesque young man, and, with his rumpled black hair, so thick and wavy about his brooding white face, the picture he most resembled was that of a provincial young lawyer stricken with the stage-disease and bound to play *Hamlet*. This was no more than a resemblance, however; his intentions were different, as he roused himself to make clear presently, though without altering his attitude, or even the direction of his glance.

"What do you mean?" he inquired huskily, a moment after Mr. Allen had seated himself at the table. "What do you mean, slamming a glass of buttermilk down on my table, Lucius Brutus Allen?"

Mr. Allen put on a pair of eye-glasses, and thoughtfully examined the morose gentleman's countenance before replying. "I would consume this flagon of

buttermilk in congenial melancholy, Joseph Pitney Perley."

Mr. Perley, still motionless, demanded: "Can't you see what I'm doing?"

"What are you doing, Joe?"

"Drinking!"

"Professionally?" Mr. Allen inquired. "Or only for the afternoon?"

"I don't want to be talked to!"

"I do," said Lucius. "Talk to me."

Here the bartender permitted himself the intervention of a giggle, and wiped his dry bar industriously—his favorite gesture. "You ain't goin' to git much talk out o' *Joe*, Lu!" he said. "All he's said sence he come in here was jest, 'Gimme same, George.' I tell him he ain't goin' to be in no condition to 'tend the band concert 's evening if he keeps on another couple hours or so. Me, I don't mind seein' a man drink some, but I like to see him git a little fun out of it!"

"Have you considered the band concert, Joe?" Mr. Allen inquired. "Do you realize what strange euphonies you'll miss unless you keep sober until seven-thirty?"

The somber Perley relaxed his gaze, and uttered a fierce monosyllable of denunciation. "Sober!" he added, afterward. "I'm sober. That's my trouble. I've been trying to get tight for three hours!"

"I'll say this fer you," the bartender volunteered—"you been tryin' *good*, too!"

"Ever experiment any?" Lucius suggested. "Why don't you go over to Doc Willis's Painless Dental

Parlors? He's got a tank of gas there, and all you do is put a rubber thing over your nose and breathe. Without any trouble at all you'll be completely out of business in forty-five seconds."

"Yeh," said the bartender. "But it don't last more'n about four minutes."

"No; that's true," Lucius admitted. "But maybe Joe could hire Doc to tap him behind the ear with one of those little lead mallets when he sees him coming out of the gas. Joe'd feel just about the same to-morrow as he will if he stays here running up a bill with you. Fact is, I believe he'd feel better."

"I tell you," said Mr. Perley, with emphasis, "I'm drinking!" And for further emphasis he rattled his glass. "Give me the same, George," he said.

George held a bottle to the light. He meditated, rubbing the back of his head; then spoke: "Tell you what I'll do. The wife's waitin' supper fer me now; I want to git back up-town early fer the trade before the concert, because I look fer quite a rush——"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Allen musingly. "Our community is going to see a night of wine and music, George."

"I'll jest open a fresh bottle fer you, Joe," the bartender continued; "and when I git back I'll charge you with how many drinks you take out of it; I got the place marked with my thumb. I'm goin' on home to supper. You want any more buttermilk, Lu?"

"Bring the pitcher," said Mr. Allen. "I will sup upon it."

"All right." And George brought to the table the

pitcher of buttermilk, a dim saucer of crackers and cheese, a brown bottle, ice-water, and fresh glasses. After that he doffed his apron, put on his hat, but no coat, and went to the door, where he turned to say: "If anybody else comes in here before I git back——"

"And calls for liquor," Mr. Allen took up the sentence, as George paused in thought, "we shall be glad to——"

"Tell 'em," said George, "they don't git it!" He departed.

Mr. Allen helped himself to buttermilk, ate a cracker, leaned back in his chair, and began to hum "Annie Laurie."

"Stop that!" said Perley, sharply.

"Certainly," said Lucius. "I'll whistle instead."

"If you do," the troubled young man warned him, in good faith, "I'll kill you!"

"What can I do to entertain you, Joe?"

"You might clear out," his friend suggested darkly. "God knows I haven't asked for your society!"

"No," said Lucius. "Our fairest gifts do oft arrive without petition. What an unusual thought! Have you noticed——"

But the other burst out suddenly in a tragic fury: "Shut up! What's the matter with you? Can't you see I want to be alone?"

Mr. Allen remained placid. "What difference do I make?" he asked. "I thought you said you were 'drinking'? If you're really in earnest about it you don't care who's here or anywhere else."

"Don't you see I'm in *misery*?" cried Perley.

"The ayes have it."

"Well, then, why in Heaven's name can't you——"

"I'll tell you," said Lucius. "I'm in misery, too. Terrible!"

"Well, what the devil do *I* care for that?"

"Haven't I got a right to sit here?" Lucius inquired mildly. "Haven't I got a right to sit here and drink, and cuss inside my innards, and take on the way you're doing? Mary Ricketts just told me that she wouldn't go to the band concert with me."

"Oh, do dry up!"

"Well, you're responsible for Mary's treatment of me, aren't you?" said Lucius. "I thought probably there'd be trouble when I saw you headed this way this afternoon."

"You do beat any ordinary lunatic!" the distressed young man protested. "I 'headed this way' this afternoon because I got one of my spells. You know well enough how it is with me, and how it was with my father before me—every so often the spell comes on me, and I've *got* to drink. What in the Lord's name has that to do with Mary Ricketts? I don't suppose I've even seen her for a month. Never did see anything of her, to speak of, in my life."

Mr. Allen replenished his glass from the pitcher of buttermilk before replying, and appeared to muse sorrowfully. "Well, maybe I was mistaken," he said. "But I——" He broke off a line of thought; then sighed and inquired: "When this 'spell' comes on you, Joe, you feel that you've '*got*' to go on until——"

"You know I do! I don't want to talk about it."

"But suppose," said Lucius, "suppose something took your mind off of it."

"Nothing could. Nothing on earth!"

"But just suppose something did turn up—right in the start of a spell, say—something you found you'd rather do. You know, Joe, I believe if it did and you found something else was *really* pleasanter, it might be you'd never start in again. You'd understand it wasn't the fun you think it is, maybe."

"Fun!" Joe cried. "I don't *want* to drink!"

And at that his stocky companion burst into outright laughter. "I know you think so, Joe," he said apologetically, when his hilarity was sufficiently diminished. "Of course you believe it. I'm not denying that."

"By George!" the unfortunate young man exclaimed. "You *do* make me sick! I suppose if I had smallpox you'd say you weren't denying I believed I had it! You sit there and drink your buttermilk, and laugh at me like a ninny because you can't understand! No man on earth can understand, unless he has the thirst come on him the way mine does on me! And yet you tell me I only 'believe' I have it!"

"Yes, I ought to explain," said Mr. Allen soothingly. "It did sound unfeeling. One of the reasons you drink, Joe, is because this is a small town;—you have an active mind, a lot of the time there's nothing much to do, and you get bored."

"I told you nobody could understand such a thirst as mine—nobody except the man that's got one like it!"

"This hankering is something inside you, isn't it, Joe?"

"What of that?"

"It comes on you about every so often?"

"Yes."

"If there weren't any liquor in the world, you'd have the thirst for it just the same, would you?"

"Just the same," Perley answered. "And go crazy from it."

"Whereas," Mr. Allen returned, "since liquor's obtainable you prefer to go crazy from the imbibing of it instead of from the hanker for it. You find that more ossedalious, and nobody can blame you. But suppose alcohol had never been discovered, would you have the hanker?"

"No, because I wouldn't have inherited it from my father. You know as well as I do, how it runs in my family."

"So I do, Joe; so I do!" Mr. Allen sighed remniscently. "Both your father and your Uncle Sam went that way. I remember them very well, and how they enjoyed it—the earlier stages, I mean. That's different from you, Joe."

"Different!" Joe laughed bitterly. "Do you suppose I get any 'enjoyment' out of it? Three days I'll drink now; then I'll be in hell—and I've got to go on. I've *got* to!"

"Funny about its being hereditary," said Lucius.

musings aloud. "I expect you rather looked forward to that, Joe?"

His companion stared at him fiercely. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"You always thought it was *going* to be hereditary, didn't you, Joe? From almost when you were a boy?"

"Yes, I did. What of it?"

"And maybe—" Lucius suggested, with the utmost mildness—"just possibly, say about the time you began to use liquor a little at first, you decided that this hereditary thing was inevitable, and the idea made you melancholy about yourself, of course; but after all, you felt that the hereditary thing made a pretty fair excuse to yourself, didn't you?"

"See here," Joe said angrily, "I'm not in any mood to stand——"

"Pshaw!" Lucius interrupted. "I was only going on to say that it's more and more curious to me about this hereditary notion. I'm thirty-five, and you're only twenty-six. I remember well when your father began to drink especially. I was seventeen years old, and you were about eight. You see you were already born then, and so I can't understand about the thirst being heredi——"

"Damn it all!" Joe Perley shouted; and he struck the table with his fist. "I told you I don't want to talk, didn't I?" Didn't you hear me say I was *drinking*?"

The amiable man across the table produced two

cigars from his coat pocket. "We'll change the subject," he said. "Smoke, Joe?"

"No, thank you."

"We'll change the subject," Lucius repeated. "I gather that this one is painful to you. You don't mind my staying here if we talk about something else?"

"No—not much."

"I mentioned that I asked Mary Ricketts to go with me to the band concert to-night, didn't I?" Mr. Allen inquired, as he lit his cigar. "I was telling you about that, wasn't I, Joe?"

"You said something about it," Mr. Perley replied with evident ennui.

"You know, Joe," said Lucius, his tone becoming confidential, "I walk past the old Ricketts property every afternoon on my way home. It's quite considerable out of my way, but I always do. Fact is," he chuckled ruefully, "I can't help it."

"I suppose you want me to ask you why," said his gloomy companion, with sincere indifference.

"Yes, Joe, will you?"

"All right. Why can't you help it?"

"Well, there's something about that old place so kind of pleasant and healthy and reliable. This is a funny world: there's a lot of things a fellow's got to be afraid of in it, and the older he gets the more he sees to scare him. I think what I like best about that old Ricketts property is the kind of *safe* look it has. It looks as if anybody that belonged in there was safe from 'most any kind of disaster—bankruptcy, lunacy, 'social ambition,' money ambition, evil thoughts, or

turning into a darn fool of any kind. You don't happen to walk by there much, do you, Joe?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, sir, you ought to!" said Lucius genially. "The orchard's in bloom, and you ought to see it. The Ricketts orchard is the show of this county. The good old judge has surely looked after those old apple-trees of his; they're every one just solid blossom. Yes, sir, every last one! Why, it made me feel like a dryad!"

"Like a who?"

"You mean that I'm thirty-five"—so Mr. Allen thought fit to interpret this question—"and that I'm getting a little fat, some baldish, and a whole lot reddish. So I am; but I'll tell you something, young Joseph: romance is a thing inside a person, just the same as your thirst. It doesn't matter what his outside is like. My trousers always bag at the knees, even when they're new, but my knees themselves are pure Grecian. It's the skinny seamstress of forty that dreams the most of marquises in silver armor; and darky boys in school forget the lesson in reveries about themselves—they think of themselves on horseback as generals with white faces and straight blond hair. And everybody knows that the best poets are always outrageously ordinary to look at. This is springtime, Joseph; and the wren lays an egg no bigger than a fairy's. The little birds——"

"By George!" Mr. Perley exclaimed, in real astonishment. "See here!" he said. "Had you been drinking a little yourself before you came in? If not, it's

the first time I knew a person could get a talking jag on buttermilk."

"No," said Lucius, correcting him. "It's on apple-blossoms. She was sitting under 'em pretending to read a book, but I suppose she was thinking about you, Joe."

"Who was?"

"Mary," Mr. Allen replied quietly. "Mary Ricketts."

"You say she was thinking about *me*?"

"Probably she was, Joe. She was sitting there, and the little birds——"

"I know you're a good lawyer," Joe interrupted, shaking his head in gloomy wonder, "but everybody in town thinks you're a nut, except when you're on a law case, and I guess they're about right. You certainly talk like one!"

Mr. Allen nodded. "A reputation like that is mighty helpful sometimes."

"Well, if you like it you're free to refer all inquirers to me," said Joe heartily. "You're trying to tell me Mary Ricketts was 'thinking' about me, and I don't suppose I've seen her as much as five times this year; and I haven't known her—not to speak of—since we were children. I don't suppose I've had twenty minutes' talk with her, all told, since I got back from college. The only girl I ever see anything of at all is Molly Baker, and that's only because she happens to live next door. I don't see even Molly to speak to more than once or twice a month. I don't have anything to do with *any* of the girls. I keep

away from 'em, because a man with the curse I've got hanging over me——"

"Thought you didn't want to talk about that, Joe."

"I don't," the young man said angrily. "But I want to know what you mean by this nonsense about Mary Ricketts and me."

"I don't know if I ought to tell you—exactly." Here Lucius frowned as with a pressure of conscience. "I'm not sure I ought to. Do you insist on it, Joe?"

"Not if you've got to talk any more about 'the little birds!'" Joe returned with sour promptness. "But if you can leave them out and talk in a regular way, I'd like to hear you."

"Have you ever noticed," Mr. Allen began, "that Mary Ricketts is a beautiful girl?"

"She's not," said Joe. "She's not anything like 'beautiful.' Everybody in town knows and always has known that Mary Ricketts is an ordinarily good-looking girl. You can call her pretty if you want to stretch it a little, but that's all."

"That all, you think?"

"Certainly!"

"You ought to see her in the orchard, Joe!"

"Well, I'm not very likely to."

"Well, just why not, now?"

"Well, why should I?"

"You mean you've never given much thought to her?"

"Certainly I haven't," said Joe. "Why should I?"

"Isn't it strange now!" Mr. Allen shook his head

wistfully. "I mentioned that I asked her to go to the band concert with me, didn't I, Joe?"

"You did."

"And did I tell you that she refused?"

"Lord, yes!"

"Well, that was it," said Mr. Allen, gently. "She just said, 'No!' She didn't say 'No, thank you.' No, sir, nothing like that; just plain 'No!' 'Well,' I thought to myself, 'now why is that? Naturally, she'd *want* to go to the concert, wouldn't she? Why, of course she would; it's the first public event that's happened since the lecture on 'Liquid Air' at Masonic Hall, along back in February. Certainly she'd want to go. Well, then, what's the matter? It must be simply she doesn't want to go with *you*, Lucius Brutus Allen!"

"That's what I said to myself, Joe. 'You're practically a fat old man from *her* point of view,' I said to myself. 'She wants to go but you aren't the fellow she wants to go *with*. Well, who is it? Evidently,' I reasoned, 'evidently he hasn't turned up, because she's just the least bit snappish the way she tells me she isn't pining for *my* escort.'

"Well, sir, I began to cast around in my mind to think who on earth it could be. 'It isn't Henry Wheen,' I thought, 'because she discouraged Henry so hard, more than a year ago, that Henry went and married that waitress here at his father's hotel. And it isn't Bax Lewis,' I thought, 'because she showed Bax *he* didn't stand any chance from the first. And it isn't Charlie McGregor or Cal Veedis,' I thought,

'because she just *wouldn't* have anything to do with either of them, though they both tried to make her till the judge pretty near had to tell 'em right out that they'd better stay away. Well, it isn't Doc Willis, and it isn't Carlos Bollingbroke Thompson, nor Whit Connor,' I thought, 'because they're *old* bachelors like me—and that just about finishes the list.' Well, sir, there's where I had to scratch my head. 'It must be somebody,' I thought, 'somebody that hasn't been coming around the Ricketts property at all, so far, because she's never gone any place she could help with those that *have* been coming around there.' Then I thought of you, Joe. 'By George!' I thought. 'By George, it might be Joe Perley! He's the only young man in town not married, engaged, or feeble-minded, that hasn't ever showed any interest in Miss Mary. There's no two ways about it: likely as not it's liable to be Joe Perley!'

"I never heard anything crazier in my life!" Joe said. "I don't suppose Mary Ricketts has given me two thoughts in the last five years."

Mr. Allen tilted back in his chair, his feet upon a rung of the table. He placed his cigar at the left extremity of his mouth, gazed at the ceiling, and waved his right hand in a take-it-or-leave-it gesture.

"Well, *why* would she?" Joe demanded. "There's nothing about *me* that——"

"No," said his friend. "Nothing except she doesn't know you very well."

At that Joe Perley laughed. "You are the funniest old Lucius!" he said. "Just because I've never been

around there and the rest have, you say that proves——”

Mr. Allen waved his hand again. “I only say there’s *somebody* could get her to go to that concert with him. Absolutely! Why absolutely? It’s spring-time; she’s twenty-three. Of course, if it is you, she isn’t very liable to hear the music except along with her family—not when you’ve got such pressing engagements *here*, of course! I’m thinking of going up there again pretty soon myself, to see if maybe Judge and Mrs. Ricketts aren’t going to walk up-town for the concert, and maybe I can sort of push myself in among the family so that I can walk anyway in the same *group* with Mary! It’s going to be moonlight, and as balmy as a night in a piece of poetry! By George! you can smell apple-blossoms from one end of the town to the other, Joe!”

“How you hate talking!” Mr. Perley remarked discouragingly.

“I hear the band is going to try ‘Schubert’s Serenade,’ ” Lucius continued. “The boy’s aren’t so bad as we make out, after all; the truth is, they play almighty well. I expect you’ll be able to hear some of it from in here, Joe; but take *me* now—I want to be out in the moonlight in that apple-blossom smell when they play ‘Schubert’s Serenade!’ I want to be somewhere where I can see the moonshine shadow of Mary Ricketts’s hat fall across her cheek, so I can spend my time guessing whether she’s listening to the music with her eyes shut or open. It’s a pink-and-

white hat, and she's wearing a pink-and-white dress, too, to-day, Joe. She was sitting under those apple-blossoms, and the little bir——"

Sudden, loud, and strong expressions suffered him not to continue for several moments.

"Certainly, Joe," Mr. Allen then resumed. "I will not mention them again. I was only leading to the remark that nightingales serenading through the almond-groves of Sicily probably have nothing particular on our enterprising little city during a night in apple-blossom time. My great trouble, Joe, is never getting *used* to its being springtime. Every year when it comes around again it hits me just the same way—maybe a little more so each year that I grow older. And this has been the first plumb genuine spring day we've had.

"At the present hour this first true blue spring day is hushing itself down into the first spring evening, and in a little while there'll be another miracle: the first scented and silvered spring night. All over town the old folks are coming out from their suppers to sit on their front porches, and the children are beginning to play hi-spy in and out among the trees. Pretty soon they'll all, old and young, be strolling up-town to hear the band play on the court-house steps. I expect some of the young couples already *have* started; they like to walk slowly and not say much, on the way to the spring concert, you know."

Mr. Allen drank another glass of buttermilk, smiled, then murmured with repletion and the pathos of a concluding bit of enthusiasm. "Oh, Lordy,

Lordy!" he said, "What it is to be twenty or twenty-five in springtime!"

"Not for me, Lucius," Mr. Perley rejoined, shaking his head.

"No, I suppose not. It does seem pretty rough," said Lucius, sympathetically, "to think of you sitting here in this reeky hole, when pretty nearly every other young fellow in town will be strolling through the apple-blossom smell in the moonlight with a girl on his arm, and the band playing, and all. Old soak Beeslum'll probably be in here to join you after while, though; and four or five farm hands, and some of the regular Saturday-night town drunks, and maybe two or three Swedes. Oh, I expect you'll have *company* enough, Joe!"

"I guess so. Anyhow, I haven't much choice! This thing's got me, and I've got to go through with it, Lucius."

"I see. Yes, sir, it's too bad! Too bad!" And Lucius looked sympathetically down, then cheerfully up again, as the swinging-doors parted to admit the entrance of the returned bartender. "Hello, George!"

"Back a'ready," said George, self-approvingly. "Ham, fried potatoes, coffee, and griddle-cakes, all tucked inside o' me, too! Didn't miss any customers, did I?"

"No."

George came to the table. "Lemme look how many drinks you owe me fer sence I went out, Joe," he said. "I had the place where she come to in the neck of the bottle marked with my thumb." He lifted the

bottle, regarded it thoughtfully at first, then with some surprise. He set it down upon the table without comment, began to whistle "Little Annie Rooney," went behind the bar, doffed his hat, resumed his apron, and continued to whistle.

Mr. Allen rose, dusting some crumbs of cracker from his attire. "I guess I must have won the buttermilk record, George," he said, as he placed a silver dollar upon the bar. "If buttermilk were intoxicating there wouldn't be a sober creature on the face of the earth. Trouble with your other stuff, George, it *tastes* so rotten!"

"I take buttermilk sometimes myself, Lu," said George as he made change. "I guess there ain't nobody seen me carryin' much hard liquor sence my second child was born. That was the time they had to jug me, and—whoo, *gosh!* you'd ought to seen what I went through when I got home that night! She's little and she was sick-abed, too, but that didn't git in *her* way none! No, sir!"

"Good night," said Lucius cheerily. "I'm going to stroll along Pawpaw Street before the band starts. Moon'll be 'way up in a little while now, and on such a night as this is going to be did Jessica, the Jew's daughter—— *You* know what I mean, George."

"Yep," said George blankly. "I gotcha, Lu."

"I'm going," said Lucius, "to go and push in with some folks to listen to the band with. Good night, Joe."

Joe Perley did not turn his head, but sat staring

fixedly at the table, his attitude being much the same as that in which Lucius had discovered him.

"Good night, Joe," the departing gentleman paused to repeat.

"What?"

"Nothing," said Lucius. "I only said 'good night.' "

"All right," said Joe, absently. "Good night."

Mr. Allen took a musical departure. "Oh, as I strolled out one summer evening," he sang, "for to meet Miss Nellie Green, all the birds and the flow'rs was singing sweetly, wherev—urr they was to be seen!"

Thus, singing heartily, he passed between the swinging-doors and out to the street. Here he continued his euphonic mood, but moderated his expression of it to an inconspicuous humming. Dusk had fallen, a dusk as scented and as alive with spring as he had claimed it would be; and a fair shaft of the rising moon already struck upon the white cupola of the court-house. . . .

Mary Ricketts was leaning upon the front gate of the Ricketts place when he came there.

"Good evening, Miss Mary," he said. "Are the judge and your mother at home?"

"They're right there on the front porch, Mr. Allen," she said cordially. "Won't you come in?"

"In a minute," he responded. "It does me good to hear you answer when I ask for your parents, Miss Mary."

"How is that?"

"Why," he said, "you always sound so friendly when I ask for *them*!"

She laughed, and explained her laughter by saying, "It's funny you don't always ask for them!"

"Just so," he agreed. "I've been thinking about that. Are you all going up to the Square pretty soon, to hear the concert?"

"Father and mother are, I think," she said. "I'm not."

"Just 'waiting at the gate'?"

"Not *for* any one!"

Lucius took off his hat and fanned himself, a conciliatory gesture. "I tell you I feel mighty sorry for one young man in this town to-night," he said.

"Who's that, Mr. Allen?"

"Well—" he hesitated. "I don't know if I ought to tell *you* about it."

"Why not me?" she asked, not curiously.

"Well—it's that young Joe Perley."

Miss Ricketts was mildly amused; Lucius's tone was serious, and if she had any interest whatever in Mr. Perley it was of a quality most casual and remote. "Why should you either tell me or not tell me anything about him?" she asked.

"You know he's such a good-looking young fellow," said Lucius. "And he's going to make a fine lawyer, too; I've had him with me in a couple of cases, and I've an idea he might have something like a real career if——" he paused.

"Yes?" she said, idly. "If what? And why is it you feel so sorry for him, and why did you hesitate to tell *me*? What's it all about, Mr. Allen?"

"I suppose I'd better explain, now I've gone this

far," he said, a little embarrassed. "I was talking with Joe to-day, and—well, the fact is we got to talking about you."

"You did?" Her tone betokened an indifference unmistakably genuine. "Well?"

Lucius laughed with increased embarrassment. "Well—the fact is we talked about you a long while."

"Indeed?" she said coldly, but there was a slight interest now perceptible under the coldness; for Miss Ricketts was not unhuman. "Was there a verdict?"

"It—it wasn't so much what he said, exactly—no, not so much that," Lucius circumlocuted. "It was more the—the length of time we were talking about you. That was the thing that struck *me* about it, because I didn't know—that is, I'd never heard—I——"

"What *are* you trying to say, Mr. Allen?"

"Well, I mean," said Lucius, "I mean I hadn't known that he came around here at all."

"He doesn't."

"That's why I was so surprised."

"Surprised at what?" she said impatiently.

"Why," said Lucius, "surprised at the length of time that we were talking about you!"

"What nonsense!" she cried. "*What* nonsense! I don't suppose he's said two words to me or I to him in two years!"

"Yes," Lucius assented. "That's what makes it all the more remarkable! I supposed the only girl he ever thought *anything* about was Molly Baker, but he told me the only reason he ever goes there is just because she lives next door to him."

"Not very polite to Molly!" said Miss Ricketts, and she laughed with some indulgence for this ungallantry.

"Still, Molly's a determined girl," Lucius suggested; "and she might——"

"She might what?"

"Nothing," said Lucius. "I was only remembering I'd always heard she was such a—such a *grasping* sort of girl."

"Had you?"

"Yes, hadn't you?"

She was thoughtful for a moment. "Oh, I don't know."

"So it seemed to me—well" He laughed hesitatingly. "Well, it certainly was curious, the length of time we were talking about you to-day!" And he paused again as if awaiting her comment; but she offered none. "Well," he said, finally, "I expect I better go join the old folks on the porch where I belong."

He was heartily received and made welcome in that sedate retreat, where, as he said, he belonged; but throughout the greetings and the subsequent conversation he kept a corner of his eye upon the dim white figure in the shadow of the maple-trees down by the gate.

Presently another figure, a dark one, graceful and young, came slowly along the sidewalk—slowly and rather hesitatingly. This figure paused, took a few steps onward again; then definitely halted near the gate.

"Who is that young man out there, talking to Mary?" asked Mary's mother. "Can you make out, father?"

"It's that young Joe Perley," the judge answered.

"I've heard he drinks a good deal sometimes," said Mrs. Ricketts, thoughtfully. "His mother says he tries not to, but that it comes over him, and that he's afraid he'll turn out like his father."

Mr. Allen laughed cheerfully. "Anybody at Joe's age can turn out any way he wants to," he said. "Mrs. Perley needn't worry about Joe any more. I just sat with him an hour down at the National House, and there was an open whisky bottle on the table before us, and he never once touched it all the time I was talking with him."

"Well, I'm glad of that," said Mrs. Ricketts. "That ought to show he has plenty of will-power, anyhow."

"Plenty," said Lucius.

Then Mary's young voice called from the spaces of night. "I'm going to walk up-town to the concert with Mr. Perley, mother. You'd better wear your shawl if *you* come."

And there was the click of the gate as she passed out.

"We might as well be going along then, I suppose," said Mrs. Ricketts, rising. "You'll come with us old folks, Lucius?"

As the three old folks sauntered along the moon-speckled sidewalk the two slim young figures in advance were faintly revealed to them, likewise saun-

tering. And Lucius was right : you could smell apple-blossoms from one end of the town to the other.

"I hope our boys will win the band tournament at the county fair next summer," said Mrs. Ricketts. "Don't you think there's a pretty good chance of it, Lucius?"

For a moment he appeared not to have heard her, and she gently repeated her question :

"Don't you think there's a pretty good chance of it?"

"Yes, more than a chance," he dreamily replied. "It only takes a hint in springtime. They'll do practically anything you tell 'em to. It's mostly the apple-blossoms and the little birds."

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